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## OUTDOOR WORK FOR CONVICTS—A SYMPOSIUM

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### I. COUNTY ROAD CAMPS IN ARKANSAS

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By JOE ASHER,

County and Probate Judge, Little Rock, Ark.

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The legislature in 1909 passed a law which permits county courts to form road and convict districts of several adjoining counties or of one county only, the condition being that the counties bear the expenses incident to working the convicts. All convicts whose sentences are under five years are completely under the control of the county judge of each county, with the exception that the county judge, county clerk and sheriff constitute a board to form rules for their government. As in this state the judge has the powers usually vested both in the county commissioners and the fiscal agent of the county, the matter is absolutely in his hands; he appoints those who work under him and makes his own conditions. So far I am the only county judge who has made a success of the road-making experiment, the others who tried it having, on account of the expense, returned their convicts to the penitentiary.

About eighteen months ago I formed this county into a road district and began working the convicts. I appointed a warden, who was bonded for \$25,000 properly to take care of the county property in his charge. He was given full authority to appoint a deputy warden and guards and discharge them at his pleasure. We then purchased a regular camp outfit and simply went to work. The camp consists of about seventy-five men, twenty white and the rest colored. I tried to use women convicts as cooks and wash-women but, after a fair trial, found them a nuisance and useless expense, so ordered them back to the penitentiary.

The camp, though of cheap construction, is a model, situated on a well-drained piece of land in a healthful locality. There is no vermin or sickness in the camp, as we enforce strict hygienic measures and feed and clothe the men so well that they thrive on the treatment and work well. We seldom punish a man, though the orders of the warden are strictly enforced. No man is shackled, but the guards

are ordered to shoot to kill any one who attempts escape; so far not one convict has been killed and only one wounded. The attempts to escape are comparatively few and only made by trustees who are used as teamsters. The maintenance and guarding of each man cost us about sixty cents per day and he does about eighty per cent of the work a free man would do. When the men are discharged they have no difficulty in obtaining work on the roads in this state if they so desire.

If I find the sentence of any man too severe or believe that he should be discharged or paroled, I promptly take the matter up with the governor or penitentiary board, and they have always honored my recommendations in the matter. When a man's time expires he is furnished with a good suit of clothes, \$2.50 in money, proper discharge papers and a lecture on the duty of a citizen. Most of the men discharged have personally thanked me for the kind treatment accorded them at the road camps.

The only opposition to this convict road work came from farmers who benefited by the construction of the road. Several, not all however, claimed that it took work from them, as they had used their teams on the public roads after their crops were harvested. The labor organizations heartily favor this method of employing prisoners. After the road was completed practically all were satisfied, and I believe that the camp is a good reformatory and that convict road work is to the best interests of the convicts and society.